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Subject: NEWS UPDATES: Industry Seeks To Stall 'Carcinogens' Report In Wake Of Formaldehyde Study (Risk Policy Report)
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Industry Seeks To Stall 'Carcinogens' Report In Wake Of Formaldehyde Study

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Industry is urging Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Kathleen Sebelius to delay release of a pending report that has been widely expected to list formaldehyde as a cause of leukemia until her department can ensure that it is consistent with the recent National Academy of Sciences' (NAS) study faulting EPA's draft finding that the chemical causes leukemia.

The NAS panel's recent report, which criticized EPA's draft risk assessment of formaldehyde for concluding that formaldehyde exposure causes leukemia and Hodgkin lymphoma, also applies to the Report on Carcinogens (RoC), the biennial report produced by HHS' National Toxicology Program (NTP), a chemical industry source says.

"The evidence is all the same," the source says. "Not only is EPA implicated but [the NAS report] also pulls the rug out from under the epidemiological support NTP believes exists to show formaldehyde is a leukemogen."

Both EPA's draft Integrated Risk Information System (IRIS) assessment and NTP's draft substance profile rely on National Cancer Institute studies of workers exposed to formaldehyde on the job and their health outcomes to link formaldehyde exposure with leukemia and other lymphohematopoietic cancers. The cancer institute said that the data, from the largest formaldehyde exposure study to date, found "a possible link" between formaldehyde exposure and cancers, including leukemia.

While EPA calculates a numerical estimate of a chemical's cancer potency, NTP does not, and instead indicates whether it considers a chemical a human carcinogen. NTP's draft profile considers formaldehyde "known to be a human carcinogen," but it is unclear exactly what is in the final document.

NTP Director Linda Birnbaum told the Society of Toxicology last month that the final version of the RoC report had been forwarded to Sebelius and is in the final stage of review with Sebelius' office before its release.

Birnbaum said she hoped the RoC would be released within the month.

But industry groups say they plan to target Sebelius to ensure the RoC is consistent with the NAS study. "I'm not sure where this issue is on Sebelius' plate," the source says. "We'll no doubt be following up to make sure that they're aware [of the NAS report] and following up" on it.

But Jonathan Samet, who chaired the NAS panel that wrote the formaldehyde report, told *Inside EPA* that the group focused specifically on its charge to review the EPA document and did not consider other recent documents that have evaluated formaldehyde's possible carcinogenicity, such as the draft RoC or the International Agency for Research on Cancer's 2010 monograph. "Really, in our review, our goal is to address the draft [EPA] IRIS assessment. We didn't come up with anything supporting or not supporting prior reviews." In an April 11 interview, Samet added that NAS panelists briefed EPA and the White House on their report, but did not provide a briefing for National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences or NTP.

Spokeswomen for both HHS and NTP declined to comment on the NAS formaldehyde report. The NTP spokeswoman deferred to HHS, noting that the RoC's release is in the Secretary's hands. "Since the NAS report is basically on an EPA risk assessment we wouldn't comment," says the HHS spokeswoman.

EPA also has yet to indicate how it will respond to the criticisms in the formaldehyde document. Research chief Paul Anastas also declined to comment telling *Inside EPA* April 13 only that staff are "still reviewing it." -- *Maria Hegstad*